

THE HISTORIAN'S CONSCIENCE: AUSTRALIAN HISTORIANS ON THE ETHICS OF HISTORY,
STUART MACINTYRE (ED). MELBOURNE: MELBOURNE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2004; PP166 + XIV,
NOTES, INDEX, PAPERBOUND \$29.95.

Working in television making historical programs throughout 2004, my 'historian's conscience' was occasionally troubled and tested by decisions we had to make about the stories we told. Mostly, these decisions were in the name of brevity, and in some ways, this was extremely useful: you cut to the heart of a story very quickly when you are forced to pare it down to its absolutes. Television resists written history's potential for unruliness, it forces you to get to the point — quickly. While I would stress that I never felt I did anything *unethical* working in television, I occasionally found myself asking questions, for example, about the way we treated interviewees. Journalists such as Janet Malcolm have written at length about journalistic ethics — that the role of the journalist is to gain someone's trust and then to betray it. Having to do this, even in small ways, was somewhat of a rude awakening for me.

So you can understand my excitement when I heard that Stuart Macintyre's follow-up to the hugely successful *The History Wars* (co-written with Anna Clark) was a book that promised a series of essays on the 'ethics of history'. The question of ethics seemed to be an ingenious response to the hullabaloo of the history wars, to deal with some of the issues these debates have raised: what is the purpose of history? What responsibility do historians have to the past and to their present-day readers? These are all big questions that cut to the heart of why and how we write and work with the past.

I looked through the table of contents, hoping to see essays from historians working in a broad array of fields. All historians, academic and public alike, grapple with ethical questions every day. How, I wondered, do they make difficult decisions that have concrete consequences for our built environment or our public imaginings of our past. How do historians deal with mistakes in their work? How might the historical profession respond to personal attacks on individual historians that flout professional codes of ethics? How do professional historians deal with political or ethical pressures on their practice? How can historians engage with the media and still feel ethical? How can academics feed community interest in their work but maintain some distinctions about the craft and practice of history?

While *The Historian's Conscience* has many engaging and challenging essays about history and ethics, it nonetheless disappointed me. Most of the questions I raised above are not directly addressed by the authors of this collection, although there are interesting and thoughtful essays to be found here. The biggest problem with the book is the narrowness of its scope. All contributors are academic historians, writing safely from the position of tenure or retirement. Macintyre notes (more than once) that he sought

contributions from public historians but all had to decline his invitation for one reason or another. One has to ask: how hard did he look for contributors outside the academy? For example, we have Graeme Davison writing about his experiences with the National Museum here, but why not ask one of the Museum's curators to write of their experience of being in the eye of the history wars storm? Why not ask a less well-known professional historian working at the coalface of heritage conservation or community outreach to write of ethical pressures?

The close scrutiny of history engendered by the history wars has arguably had a greater impact on public historians because they do not have the luxury of the buffer zone of the academy; they are communicating with people who do not necessarily have a sympathetic ear for historical research. Yet their work is crucial to public understandings of our past. Most people gain their historical understanding not from the works of academic historians, but from the way the work of historians are translated and adapted for a broader audience through professional history, heritage and conservation, family and local history, museums and historic sites and the media. Beverly Kingston writes in her essay that 'bad history is not life-threatening like a faulty bridge or a wrongly diagnosed illness' (p83), and she is right, to a point. But if the professional historian or heritage consultant is unable to persuade those in power that a bridge is historically significant, for example, it might be demolished. Bad history *does* have consequences for our society and environment. But without contributors from public and professional historians, the *Historian's Conscience* cannot fully enter into this debate.

The focus on well-known names also conceals some of the other ethical concerns involved in producing history in an era of publish or perish. The fraught process of navigating university ethics committees is of increasing concern to historians: why include not an essay on this vitally important issue? Some contributors — Penny Russell and Beverly Kingston — discuss their research methods and their reluctance to use research assistants. But research assistants are essential contributors to many contemporary history projects. Why not ask one such research assistant to contemplate their role in the production of such history? Stuart Macintyre could have asked Anna Clark to write on her experience of co-writing *The History Wars*. Macintyre touches on the 'valuable contribution' that research assistants can make in the production of histories (p10) but does not extend this to thinking about the ethical issues around these sorts of research collaborations. How historians might, and ought, to relate to each other was one of the central issues of the history wars debate, so it is a shame that this has been left relatively untouched in *The Historian's Conscience*.

Nonetheless, one must review the book at hand, not the book one wishes had been written, and *The Historian's Conscience* contains many riches, especially the candid, reflective essays of Penny Russell, Marilyn Lake and Iain McCalman. Lake writes of the difficulties of writing history when the sentiments and political outlooks of the

contemporary age differ from those in the past. This was particularly complicated for her because she sees her ethical obligation as an historian to 'explain the past — people's choices and their sense of themselves — to people living in the present' (p95). Penny Russell explores the relationship of trust that exists between historian and reader in history, a trust she sees as fostered partly by footnotes but mainly by the 'analytic, interpretive, narrative "voice" of the historian' (p110) — the historian who has combed the archival record and who is able to tell us what lies there and what it means. Fiona Paisley and Rhys Issac both emphasise the ways in which remembering the past has important contemporary political implications: Paisley through a discussion of finding painful or offensive material in the archives; Issac, intriguingly, through a discussion of the presentation of America's colonial past at Colonial Williamsburg. John Hirst gives a clear-eyed account of the ways personal circumstances influence the writing of history, outlining how he found new insights into modes of colonial authority whilst parenting an unruly teenager. All these contributors emphasise that good history requires not a disavowal of personal motivations, but honesty, compassion and empathy.

Iain McCalman's essay is one of the few to explicitly address issues pertaining to history outside the academy and to really underline the very serious issues that are at stake in the history wars debate:

In museums, in the media, in the courts and in the universities, professional historians are being required as never before to defend the truth value of our discipline. We must face the brutal reality that it is the public and the government, rather than our own academic peers, whom we must persuade of our social and intellectual worth and who, directly or indirectly, pay for our research. Part of what is at stake in the History Wars is how we are able to assert and defend our authority as expert professionals. (p155)

McCalman is right. We do need to persuade the public and government of the value of our research, particularly in an anti-intellectual climate that has grown so florid that Padraic McGuinness can be appointed to the ARC advisory board with barely a word of protest. McCalman writes lucidly of his experience writing history for a mainstream audience. This is surely one of the most urgent tasks for historians — to explain what we do and how we do it to a public that is clearly interested in Australia's history.

It seems to me that at the heart of the history wars was a sense that academic historians had lost their authority, lost their control over the telling of the national story. I wonder if this loss of authority was because we have, to a great degree, stopped talking to the nation about its past on terms it understands. We have, for the most part, abandoned this ground to filmmakers, heritage consultants and, at the extreme, to the opinion columnists and their cronies. We need to start claiming it back, in both academic

and public history contexts. The academic rebuttals of Keith Windschuttle's work that appeared recently are one way to do this. Opening up the academic conversation about history to a broader spectrum of participants is another. *The Historian's Conscience* is a good starting point for this but it is not the last word on the questions of ethics raised by the history wars. Let's hope the conversations continue.

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